

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH DR. ALI AL-DABBAGH, SPOKESMAN FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF IRAQ VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ DATE: THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2007

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MR. AL-DABBAGH: I've been asked to give a statement about the reconciliation and the situation here in Iraq and the report of the General Petraeus and the Crocker.

The government of Iraq had received the report, the joint report between General Petraeus and the Ambassador Crocker. It is a positive report, and it reflects the professionalism and the neutrality which the report's been computed. We feel that this report has been drafted by two persons -- they had spent enough time in Iraq, and they got good about the reality on the ground and the complication, which is -- (inaudible) -- the political situation.

The security issue, the security situation Iraq as everybody knows has been improved, although still we have some hard areas and ripe areas which need the government -- the government of Iraq needs to fix this problem. But still there is a level of threat in some of the areas. We definitely need -- (inaudible) -- and it has worked in order to get it stable.

Regarding the political situation, we do understand that there is a problem. We are in a difficult situation politically because of some of the political groups. They are not consistent with the whole report. That is why we have 15 ministries not operating because -- not operating well because the ministers are not there. We do understand at the same time there is deficiency in the capacity of the ministers, and there is deficiency and less experience, less management skills, which has been noted during the last past year. This needs to be fixed as well. That is why the government, the prime minister is asking for a full reshuffling of the Cabinet in order to have the performance of the Cabinet much better in order to give better services for the citizens of Iraq.

At the same time, regarding the militias, militias have been still represent a threat for the citizens of Iraq. The government is trying to solve this issue without having, again, one more complication. We do understand that the presence of the militias is affecting the whole civil life of Iraqis. At the same time, there is no way that the militias could share the security issues along with the government.

Security issues is the sole responsibility of the Iraqi government and its security forces. This is a briefing of the situation. I would like that

actually the questions could be more concentrated on each issue with any of the people.

I would like welcome everybody there who is there in Washington, and I am ready to answer any questions which they --

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): All right, sir. Thank you very much.

First on the line was Andrew Lubin with ON Point, so, Andrew, why don't you get us started?

Q Okay. Dr. al-Dabbagh, good afternoon. This is Andrew Lubin from ON Point. We thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. Sir, the other day, in response to a question from Senator John McCain about whether or not he thought the Maliki government would be able to get the job done, Ambassador Crocker commented that his "level of confidence is under control."

In today's newspaper, it's reporting that the oil compromise agreement is collapsing. What would you like to say -- or what specifics can you give to the American public that your government's going to be able to successfully use the time that our troops have bought them?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Could you repeat the last paragraph -- what to give the American citizens.

Q Yes, sir. I said, what specifics would you like to tell the -- would you like to give to the American people that your government will be able to successfully and succinctly use the time that our troops have provided them?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Yes, we do understand and appreciate all the effort and all the sacrifice which the families of the American Army and soldiers that are serving here in Iraq to help Iraqis and to fight all the tyranny and the dictatorship and the terrorist group which present a great threat not only for Iraq -- this is for the region -- and it is extended even to the United States.

Iraq is becoming a dangerous place for the -- for such groups. Unless the effort which is being touted by the multinational forces and in front of the American troops, nothing could be done -- nothing could be done. It is beyond the capacity of Iraq and beyond the capacity of the region to fight such devil enemies, and at the end the (cheer ?) and the fair will be flourished and it will be expanded even to the citizens of the America. Your soldiers have done a very good job in supporting the Iraqi security forces to fight such devil enemies.

We are in a good stage of building up our security forces. And we think that the -- we do need still more time in order to get the -- such forces being built in order to get an agreed withdrawal of the -- the time -- might be the time to raise -- the question being raised, when will be the time? Actually, we couldn't fix a time. Neither the United States administration could fix a time when this could happen, but we feel that we are going on a good schedule till now. We have our forces in Baghdad.

They are taking the lead in some of the areas and they are taking the front in fighting the -- such groups. We feel that if this speed of the training continue, we could have that -- good numbers being withdrawn next week, next -- sorry, next year.

Q Sir, again, if I could follow up for a second, but Dr. al-Dabbagh, General Jones's report of last week referred to your minister -- ministry of the interior as corrupt and dysfunctional. Your anti-corruption minister just quit in disgust and left for the United States. What is happening in your government on the political? I've seen your troops in action. You have good soldiers. ISF is doing a great job. It's the government of Iraq that's a step behind and is out of step with everything else, is it not?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: We are sorry that the Jones report didn't reflect the actual situation on the ground. Cannot be such -- so easy that to -- (inaudible) -- for four years. We think that the best thing to do -- we do understand that there is violation, there is -- there are people that are -- there are bad people in the police and the ministry of interior. We had -- till now, we had fired 14,450 persons in the ministry of interior, because either they are violating the human rights, they are connected with the militias, they are connected with the gangs, with a certain gang, they are connected with a certain crime, organized crime.

And this is the effort that's going on in order to improve, to restructure the whole ministry of interior. We had now -- till now, we had good appreciation of the human rights. Now any and each and every violation of the human rights is being inspected and being accounted and being -- we have 11 high rank police been fired in the ministry of interior, because they are violating the human rights.

Till now, we cannot compare. Now we are month of September. If we look back on month of January, we have good achievement, good restructuring. But still, we do need -- we do understand. We do need more to get this minister of interior improved better, to work better, to reach the level, accepted level and the same standard which is -- an international standard of appreciating the human rights, of working in neutrality.

We do understand now the people of Iraq. They look for the police different from bad, from the last year. Last year, the people look forward at a sectarian police system. Now the people look on it, because there is a good improvement. But again, I insist that we do need also more steps to be taken in order to keep this as professional and neutral, and to keep all Iraqis feel that it is their -- this police is for them. It is not sectarian. It is not corrupted. This is very important, and we need to work for it and we are working to achieve that objective.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

And David Axe.

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Thanks, Andrew.

Q Dr. al-Dabbagh, this is David Axe with Wired.

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Hi, David.

Q How are you?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Fine.

Q Thank you.

Can you give me -- you say that security's improving. Can you prove that? Can you give me an example of evidence that security's improving?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Yes, Al Anbar is a good example. Although that we had a very sad -- today the sheikh, Abdul Sattar Abu Reesha, has been assassinated, three hours -- almost two-and-a-half hours back.

He's been assassinated during his -- he just was coming out from his house, and he has been -- by a suicide bomber -- car, suicide car has been in the front of his house and been blasted, and he had been killed, along with two of his escorts.

The Anbar level of security. We been Thursday -- last Thursday -- we been there, and we had noticed that the security level is much better than what we expect. And President Bush took this place to meet the Iraqis -- definitely shows that how secured is Anbar. Al Anbar markets is open, and the people are practicing their normal life due to the joint effort of Iraqi security forces with the support of multinational forces, along with the tribes, which they succeed in dismissing all such groups. This is number one.

Number two in Baghdad. In Baghdad we had noticed that the sectarian killing has been dropped down dramatically. It is noticed here. In Baghdad also the level of the threat has been -- but still, we do -- I do say that it is -- still there is a threat in Baghdad but the level of the -- number of casualties has become less in Baghdad.

In Diyala, which was totally being kidnapped by al Qaeda groups, now there is a great effort in Diyala in order to get it liberated from those enemies. And Salahuddin is the same. All surrounding -- the areas surrounding Baghdad, now, you could feel that the people are moving.

And then -- the curfew. The curfew has been reduced. It was started at 10:00. Now it's started from 12:00 to 5:00. It was from 10:00 to 7:00 -- to 6:00 morning. Sorry. Now it's been reduced, and the people are -- some of the places, the markets open till 9:00 night. This was -- never happened since the years in Baghdad. This is part of the improvement in the security there.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Dave Dilegge.

Q Yes. Yeah. Good afternoon, Dr. al-Dabbagh. Dave Dilegge here, Small Wars Journal. Thanks. Thanks a lot for being with us.

Yesterday I got a copy of a document called Iraq First -- that's the Iraqi national security strategy -- that lays out that strategy for the years -- for the present time through 2010. Though, within that document, there is this -- you know, of course, it deals mostly with security, but also it deals with other aspects of national reconciliation, other ministries' responsibilities.

I'm curious -- is there a similar strategy or document or framework that encompasses all elements of your national power, lays out what you expect or some benchmarks for the next several years?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Definitely there's an Iraqi benchmark.

We could talk about the economy, about the security and about the services. And the services -- I do agree that the service has not improved in some of the places, like Baghdad.

We don't have a problem in the production of the power, of the electricity, or the production of the fuel. But the problem we have is the transporting them, because the -- there is a threat to the -- for example, we had reached -- since 1991 we had reached to 5,500 megawatts production of the electricity. This is this number -- never been since 1991.

But the problem -- for example, yesterday one of the grids which brings the power to Baghdad has been attacked, and then we have a reduction in the number of supply in Baghdad. But in the other cities, normally we do have around 12 hours of supply; like Ar Ramadi, Al Anbar, we have more than 15 hours' supply. This level never reach in -- since even the past regime, the former regime.

Regarding the economy, we do have a good benchmark of the economy that -- which (has been ?) achieved. But still we do need to improve it, definitely.

The level of salaries at the time of Saddam Hussein was -- meant -- the salary of a teacher, for example, it was three -- \$2 to \$3 dollar month, which he couldn't buy even, you know, at the minimum of his demands. Now the minimum salary is 200 U.S. dollars a month. The currency -- the Iraqi dinar was 1,500 at the time of being -- Baghdad being liberated. Now it is 1,280, which is around -- we could say 20 percent has been improved, the currency, which makes the commodities here cheaper, or it has not been more the price dues to the inflation -- the price didn't crisis -- the price of the commodities.

So this is the benchmark which Iraqis -- they put in order to make the -- to ask and to keep the government accountable. But still we -- I -- again, I mentioned that on a political side, on a political side, there is a problem, and the -- all the political groups need to work and to share the responsibility of improving the situation. The situation is not good, and we do need to improve it in order to support improvement in the security, to improve the secure -- the improvement in the economy, as well as the services. This is part of the benchmark which Iraqis would like to see.

Q Thank you. MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you, sir.

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Andi?

Q Dr. al-Dabbagh, this is Andi Hurley with MilBlogs. Last time --=

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Hi, Andi.

Q Hi. Last time we spoke, I asked you to give us your read on Iraqi public opinion with respect to our presence in Iraq. And today I wanted to ask you -- and this may not be totally in your lane -- but is there an official government agency or a reputable outside organization which monitors Iraqi public opinion? And if so, where could we find their data?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Where you could find this data? The question?

Q Well, is there any organization which -- a reputable organization which conducts public opinion polling of the Iraqis?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: Yeah, I don't hear that an Iraqi public opinion organization which could -- I give its name, but I do understand some of the reports being released from different international public opinion, which reflects sometimes from time to time. But I cannot recommend anyone.

But regarding your question, let me concentrate on your question. The Iraqis look on all the security forces, whether they are Iraqi or multinational forces, now positively due to the improvement in the security situation. This is naturally -- when the people enjoy a better security situation, definitely they would feel that this is an effort of such a brave men which they protect them and for such a brave men which they provide that level of security for them.

The second issue which I want to make it as a benchmark. The number of the people which they are supporting, which they are calling the security forces, we cannot accommodate the number of calls which is coming from the Iraqi citizens telling the Iraqi security forces about the threat or about suspects which they have about anything, any person they do suspect. And this help us a lot during the past nine months. It help us here in Baghdad as well as in other cities, and the cooperation of the citizens -- of Iraqi citizens with both multinational forces and the Iraqi forces shows that this is part of the benchmark which you are looking for.

I think that there is a great appreciation for the report of all security forces operating in Iraq.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you very much, sir.

Any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah, Jack, I have one. Dr. Al-Dabbagh, Andrew Lubin again from ON Point. I've got an e-mail here that Sheikh Sattar from Sons of Anbar has been assassinated today, and this just came in a minute ago when Andy was talking. Can you give us a statement or make a comment, please?

MR. AL-DABBAGH: We are sorry. I just got a telephone (call) immediately after being assassinated -- he has been assassinated, three hours back, at 3:00 for (the last time ?). He has been subjected to a bomb outside his farm, and he's been killed. We feel all condolences to his family for such a brave man which he takes the lead to protect the Al Anbar and all the worst areas at a time when everybody was afraid and scared of even talking against al Qaeda and against such a terrorist group. But he took the lead, along with his people, along with other tribes' leaders. And really we -- the government of Iraq feel sad and hold the sadness, the government, regarding for the assassination of such a brave man.

We do understand -- I spoke with the other tribes which is also surrounding -- (inaudible) -- that they are all -- they show the interest and show the will, and they are decided to continue and they will not -- they will not change. This is one of their main objectives, is to keep the Al Anbar secure, and the assassination of Sheikh Sattar Abu Reesha will not affect them

and will not influence them. And contrary, they show more interest that they have to continue in order to protect their region from any of such terrorist group, Andrew.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay, thank you, sir.

And Dr. Ali Al-Dabbagh, the chief spokesman for the government of the Iraq with us today for Bloggers Roundtable. Dr. Al-Dabbagh, thank you very much for joining us. And hopefully, we can --

MR. AL-DABBAGH: I appreciate for you and all the people which they have raised the questions. Thank you very much for all of you, and have a good day.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much.

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